INTO THE WORLD
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Psalm 1
John 17:6–19
Acts 1:6–14

"As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them."
John 17:18 (NRSV)

God of love, help us to remember
that Christ has no body now on earth but ours,
no hands but ours, no feet but ours.
Ours are the eyes to see the needs of the world.
Ours are the hands with which to bless everyone now.
Ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good.

Teresa of Avila
1515–1582

Memorial Day is a reminder of our indebtedness to those who gave their lives serving their country. For many of us, they include family members we knew and loved who fought and died and whose sacrifice continues to inspire us and move us deeply. I remember them: my uncle Frank, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Buchanan, killed in France, near the Belgium border; his son Dick, my cousin, killed shortly after in the South Pacific; his other son, Frank, my cousin, shot down over Italy, missing in action—Frank came home; my uncle Jack, PFC John Calvin McCormick, for whom I am named, killed on Saipan.

Memorial Day is a reminder that young Americans continue to die today in service to their country, and we are forever in their debt.

And Memorial Day is a reminder of moments in history when the United States stood with and fought with brave allies against tyranny.

The last Saturday of April is a national holiday in Italy: "Liberation Day." It remembers and celebrates the liberation of Italy from Fascism in World War II. The fighting was fierce all the way up the Italian peninsula. An American military cemetery outside Florence, row upon row of white crosses and stars of David, is a reminder of the Americans who died there.

People don’t forget that sacrifice.

In Italy recently, I was watching a group of men playing bocce in the center of the little town where we were staying. It was the Sunday afternoon of Liberation Day weekend.

An elderly gentleman, on a cane, walked slowly toward me and began speaking to me in Italian. “I’m sorry,” I said. “No Italiano; I’m American.”

“Ah,” he said, touching his heart, “America, America.”

He was old enough to have experienced what happened in 1943. Maybe he was part of it.

He reminded me of the sacrifice—and the debt—we all share and remember on Memorial Day.

We thank you, God of love, for the world this morning:
for blue sky and warm sun, greening grass and budding flowers;
for a holiday weekend, and for this time together.
Be present to us; silence in us any voices but yours.
Speak the word you have for us, the word we need.
In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Episcopal priest and college professor Barbara Brown Taylor has written a wonderful new book, *An Altar in the World*, in which she says that when, as a young woman, she decided that she was a believer, she joined a church to learn about God but instead learned to be suspicious of the world. That mirrors my experience exactly. I was a Presbyterian on Sunday morning and a Baptist in the evening, because my friends went to the youth group in a big Baptist church that was frankly a lot more fun than our Presbyterian effort, which was small and not very lively. The Baptists played games, had Bible memorization contests, had snacks—something unheard of at my church. I was also packed off to daily Vacation Bible School at the Baptist church for two weeks every summer. The Baptists taught me a lot of Bible, for which I am grateful, and they also taught me to sing a little song (the tune, by the way, is one of the tunes the organist at Wrigley Field plays to generate a little fan enthusiasm when things are slowing down on the field —which they have been recently):

Be careful little eyes what you see.
Be careful little eyes what you see.
For the Father up above is looking down in love,

So be careful little eyes what you see.
Be careful little hands what you touch . . .
Be careful little feet where you go . . .
Be careful little ears what you hear . . .

And so on. Every time I hear it at Wrigley Field I think about the BYPU—Baptist Young People's Union—and Bible school and "Be careful little eyes, hands, feet" and the message that the world is a threatening, sinful, dirty place and a follower of Jesus will be constantly on guard and keep the world at arm's length.

The idea still has great currency: that Christianity is not about life in this world but the next world; that worldly is something Christianity is not; that Christians are slightly other worldly—that is, a little uncomfortable with the world—that Christian attention is better focused on eternity than the life of the city or nation in the here and now; that Christianity is, as an old college professor of mine liked to say, "pie-in-the-sky-bye-and-bye"; that holiness, true, pure spirituality, is to transcend life in this world, this body, this community, this time and place.

That thinking has a long history, all the way back to the ancient Greeks, who believed that reality is divided into two realms—matter and spirit—and spirit is a lot better than matter and that human beings are also divided between body and soul and soul is a lot better than body. In fact, your body can get you in a lot of trouble, not to mention that it is getting older by the day, in case you haven't noticed. Many early interpreters of Jesus were influenced by that Greek dualistic way of thinking, even though Jesus himself never talked like that. He was a Jew, and Judaism—in distinction from Greek dualism—holds that there are not two different realms but one; that the world is a holy place; that you find God in the world and holiness in life lived in the world.

The early Christians were influenced by the Greeks, but they had another problem: their world was not a friendly place. In fact, the world was hostile and dangerous. In a matter of a few decades, Rome itself turned against them and began several centuries of brutal persecution. So the idea that Christians ought to withdraw from the world, escape from the world, made sense. The idea of monasticism—that true Christian life is lived away from the world, literally walled off from the world—was powerful and remains so today.

Who doesn't long for a way to live more simply, to get away from the chaos, the violence, the dirt and noise of the world? Who wouldn't prefer a way to draw closer to God without all the distractions of the world? Who wouldn't prefer to be a little less captive to the body's insistent needs and urges and desires? "Get away from it all" the travel ads plead, and who can argue with

that? So it is logical that sometimes church and religious faith become a way to do just that: get away from the world.

Everybody needs a break, a time away, a vacation, downtime, to sort things out, think things through, to simply "be" for a while, and you could do that permanently—either literally withdraw from the world or, more probably, withdraw into yourself, into a kind of studied indifference to the world—except for a few sentences in the New Testament. The first is in a prayer Jesus prayed at the table of the Last Supper. It's time for summing up, for final words. The end is near. And so he prays to God for his dearest friends, his disciples. He asks God to protect them, to keep them at one with one another, to give them joy in their life and work, and then this: "I am not asking you to take them out of the world. . . . As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."

"Into the world": it could not be more clear. Jesus wants his followers to be in the world, wants his people in every age not to try to escape from the world, transcend the world, but to engage the world, to live in it thoroughly, to live their lives fully in the world, to love the world just as God loved the world, to respect and honor and serve the world just as he did.

The second sentence is one of my favorite Bible verses. It's a question: "Why are you looking up?" We know the occasion as the Ascension. Forty days after Easter, the risen Christ is still with his disciples. Now he will return to God. Modern Christians stumble all over the event when trying to take it literally, to understand it in terms of space and time. But the idea it represents is among our most important and precious. "He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God" we affirm in the Apostles' Creed. Jesus is not dead, but alive and sitting at the right hand of God. Jesus, that is to say, is the authority, the final authority—not sickness, suffering, not injustice and oppression, not racism, sexism, any ism, not even death; Jesus Christ is the final authority. That's what "ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right of God" means, and it is the very heart of what we believe and very good news.

When it happened, whatever it was, the disciples were confused, amazed, astonished. And just then two young men appeared and asked simply, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up to heaven?" It's time to stop staring and get going, time to stop pondering eternity and start thinking about Jerusalem, time to stop whatever you were thinking by way of withdrawing from the world and recommit yourself to it. The text continues, "Then they returned to Jerusalem." They did not go off into the desert to meditate; they went to work.

The world is where the followers of Jesus are supposed to be—the world with all its messiness and violence and corruption. The world is still the

object of God's love. The world is where God's people will live and work and love and serve, and Jesus promised the world is precisely where they will find joy.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had every reason in the world to keep the world at arm's length, to keep his religious commitments in the realm of the spirit, totally separated and safe from what was going on in the world around him. Most of his fellow German Christians managed to do that in the 1930s, as the Nazis came to power. As individual liberties began to disappear—freedom of expression, freedom of assembly—as Jews at first were blamed in the official newspapers for everything that was wrong, then tormented, demonized, their property confiscated, their businesses destroyed, finally rounded up and shipped away to concentration camps, German Christians looked the other way. "It's not our business. It's politics. It's just the way things are in the world. Our concern is religion, matters of the spirit, our souls, our future in heaven, not what is transpiring in the world around us."

In the same way, American Christians in the South in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries averted their eyes from the ugliness of slavery and segregation and racism. "It's not our business," they said. "Our business, the business of the church, is the spiritual realm, the health of our souls, not what is happening in the world."

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century church leaders, pushed by some Christians of moral courage and conscience to take a stand, to declare themselves, to condemn slavery, refused, and came up with a doctrine to justify it. They called it the "Spirituality of the Church."

In Germany, Bonhoeffer, a gentle intellectual, a pacifist, came to the conclusion that his faith demanded more of him. His faith would not allow him not to see what was happening. You know his story: he joined the Resistance and became part of the plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler—not in spite of his Christian faith, but because of it.

The plot failed. Bonhoeffer was arrested and executed a few days before the war ended. His *Letters and Papers from Prison* is a modern Christian classic.

From his prison cell he wrote to a friend that Christianity doesn't shield us from life but "plunges us into all the dimensions of life." He went on, "During the last year or so I have come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity. . . . I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life. . . . Later I discovered that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe" (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 226).

In Barbara Brown Taylor's book I referred to earlier, *An Altar in the World*, she remembers a question an older, wiser clergy friend asked: "What is saving your life now?" The book is her answer: *An Altar—in the World*. She writes so eloquently:

> There is no spiritual treasure to be found apart from the bodily experience of life on earth . . . engaging in the most ordinary physical activities with the most exquisite attention I can give them. My life depends on ignoring all touted distinctions between the secular and the sacred, the physical and the spiritual, the body and the soul. What is saving my life now is becoming more fully human, trusting that there is no way to God apart from real life in the real world. (Introduction, p. xv)

We celebrated the ninety-fifth anniversary of this wonderful church building on Michigan Avenue last Sunday, and in the process, I thought a lot about our history. And I am convinced that we are uniquely strong today because of a decision my predecessor and the leaders of this congregation made forty-five years ago. There was a major upheaval happening in American culture: the Vietnam War; the civil rights movement; the sexual revolution, assassination of a president and his brother and the leader of the civil rights movement; student protests; street riots. Sometimes churches were caught in the middle and became targets as visible symbols of "the establishment." Civil rights activists, accusing the church of complacency if not actual support and participation in racism, showed up on Sunday morning, walked down the aisles of churches, took over, occupied pulpits, and scolded startled and frightened worshippers. Caught in the middle of urban violence, churches had valuable stained glass windows smashed, graffiti spray painted on the walls. I believe there was a brick thrown through one of our windows. In many cases, church members had left for the suburbs a decade before, and in agonizing board meetings, churches decided to leave the chaos and violence and threat of the city and move to the suburbs. When moving was not possible, many, if not most, churches did the prudent thing: locked the doors, covered up the stained glass, installed security systems, hired overnight guards—sometimes armed—built a chain-link fence around the building. And at just that critical, dangerous moment, this church did the most amazing thing: opened the doors, invited neighbors in, created programs to assist and stand with and serve: a Social Service Center, a Tutoring program, bringing children from Cabrini-Green into the church. It was not universally applauded, believe me. Some members didn't like it at all—were offended and angry that "they" were coming into "our" building—and took their membership elsewhere. But the church held firm, created more ways to serve: a Counseling Center, a program for older adults, a Day School. Over the years the list continues to grow and the tradition deepens. The doors remain open every day. The city, the world, is here from seven in the morning till nine at night. Music and drama and art, counseling, food, clothing, shelter, education—this church is not only in the

world, the world is here every day. And I have concluded that the decision to remain and open the doors, made in the midst of the stress and threat of the sixties, saved this church's soul and quite possibly its life.

And you know, along the way something else happened and continues to happen: joy, just as Jesus promised and asked God on behalf of his followers. Joy and laughter in life in the world, in faith—not providing an escape from the world but a way to engage and serve the world.

It's personal for each of us: not just our institutional attachments, our belonging to a church that has decided to risk living its institutional life as fully in the world as possible, but at a personal level to think like that and to live like that, to love the world, this world, so deeply and passionately that you can't get enough of it, to honor and respect and value the gift of your own life by living it as fully as possible, every day of it, every moment of your precious and one and only life. To keep your eyes and ears and hands open to the miracle of every day and your heart vulnerably open to your loved ones, your friends, your neighbors; to live more thoroughly in the here and now, to see and hear and touch and smell the sacred, the holiness of God all around us.

On the next-to-the-last day in Italy, we drove to Assisi, a kind of pilgrimage. I had been reading about the Middle Ages, the medieval church, the amazing outburst of artistic creativity, and so I wanted to see again the gorgeous basilica where Francis of Assisi is buried and the amazing frescoes by Giotto—one of the great treasures of the world—depicting Francis's life. And I thought about him: in 1181 born into wealth, living a life of comfort and ease, his conversion and his sense of vocation— to live simply, to serve and love unconditionally, and to do it not in the relative security of a monastery, but in the world, radically in the world. That was Francis's great gift. Giotto's wonderful frescoes show him being in the world, helping the poor, tending the sick, loving the world and its creatures, once even preaching to the birds.

Francis understood that the holy life, the profoundly joyful life, is life lived thoroughly in the world, invested in the world, given away to the world in the name of his Lord Jesus Christ.

He left a prayer, a thoroughly human, this-worldly prayer, about hatred and love, strife and peace, hurt and forgiveness:

> "Lord, make us servants" in the world, this world, this time and place where you call us to be to love and serve and where you promise us joy.

Amen.